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PP RUEHLH RUEHPW
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ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 081144Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2635
INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0228
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0280
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4849
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 1582
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 7185
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 6125
RHMFISS/FBI WASHINGTON DC
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 000990

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PK](#)
SUBJECT: SWAT -- NO QUICK FIXES

Classified By: CDA Gerald Feierstein for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

Summary and Introduction

¶1. (S/NF) Prime Minister Gilani's May 7 speech announcing the government's intent to "eliminate militants" appears to be the launching point of full scale military operations in Swat. Although Pakistani civilian and military leaders are sounding the right notes about tackling militancy, we should remain cautious in perceiving any strategic shift in Islamabad's thinking. A sustained commitment to defeating militancy on Pakistan's home turf will become clear only when the government devotes resources to military operations and building civilian administrative capacity that matches the dimensions and gravity of the problem.

¶2. (S/NF) At present, the army appears to be committing more of its resources to renewed operations in Swat than in the past. Retaking control of the district, however, will be a long hard slog. Pakistan has a history of talking tough with an initial burst of force only to be followed by misgivings and negotiations with militants once operations bog down and public opinion turns critical. Militant control of population centers, roads, and the heights in Swat is formidable. Despite government efforts to evacuate the population, the confrontation that is shaping up is likely to inflict significant civilian casualties. Nascent popular support will almost certainly be strained by the prolonged military campaign that will be required. Swat's militants are battle-hardened, tenacious, and unconventional, and the Pakistan army's track record in Swat is poor.

¶3. (S/NF) The counter-insurgency nature of the fight in Swat and the promised wave of retaliatory violence by militants outside of Swat will test the patience and resolve of Pakistani leaders. There are no fast, easy, or clean fixes for Swat and other areas in Pakistan's northwest region that have become deeply troubled by militancy. Timely, well-targeted assistance, particularly humanitarian aid (septel), however, can help give the military some of the space it requires to succeed in Swat and to keep the focus of the story on combating militants rather than the government's failure to address the needs of those displaced by the fighting. End Summary/Introduction.

Widening Operations in Swat

¶4. (S/NF) Over the past few days, the Pakistani military has been conducting limited operations in Swat, including aerial

bombardment of the Peochar valley, artillery fire on selected targets, and some patrolling. Five battalions of Special Services Group (SSG) commandos (approximately 3,000 soldiers) are preparing to infiltrate the Peochar valley over the May 9-10 weekend (weather permitting).

15. (S/NF) While Frontier Corps operations in Lower Dir and Buner are aimed at sealing Swat from the west and south, it is unclear whether the Pakistani forces have moved into positions to the east around Shangla. (Note: In late 2007/early 2008 when the first army offensive in Swat began to fizzle out, Mullah Fazlullah and core TTP leadership reportedly managed to escape via routes through Shangla.) The high mountains to the north around Upper Dir and Chitral are less likely passages for militants in any substantial numbers. There are reports, however, that militants from South Waziristan are filtering into Swat through Dir.

Tough Terrain

16. (C) The Swat district is a long broad valley with rugged hills. The principal north-south road hugs the eastern wall of the valley above the Swat River. The route is paved but narrow, winding over one lane bridges and descending into stream beds in central Swat around Matta and Khwazakhela - TTP's stronghold. Passage for army convoys will likely be labored and exposed to militants who control the heights above the road. Mingora and Saidu Sharif, Swat's two principal towns, have been "thoroughly penetrated" by militants, further complicating the military's position and

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objectives.

Nascent Popular Support

17. (C) Images of a young woman being flogged in Swat and rapid militant expansion into Buner helped fuel what appears to be growing Pakistani public support for military operations to combat militants. Pakistani memories, however, can be short and fickle. Despite government efforts to evacuate Swat residents, the confrontation between the army and the militants is likely to inflict a high number of civilian casualties. Local civilian demands for "surgical operations" with minimal collateral damage are unlikely to be met. Without additional humanitarian aid, projected estimates of 500,000 displaced Swatis (in addition to the approximately 500,000 IDPs from earlier operations in Bajaur and Mohmand Agencies) could overwhelm the capacity of the Northwest Frontier provincial government, resulting in scenes of chaos and misery. Those images could quickly erode public support for sustained military action in Swat. There is little to no evidence the GOP is prepared to initiate a media campaign to cultivate support for military action against the militants.

Success on the Third Attempt?

18. (S/NF) The army launched operations twice in Swat -- in November 2007 and January 2009 -- and failed. Heavy use of indiscriminate artillery fire and failure to protect the population from targeted militant violence soured local public opinion on military intervention in the district. Chief of Army Staff General Kayani has said that he now has the necessary political support to launch a third offensive.

19. (C) However, the Pakistani military's orientation and tactics remain that of a conventional force with little counter-insurgency training and that posture is unlikely to change quickly. After an initial burst of requests for U.S. intelligence and materiel support, the Pakistani military has backed off because of continued concern about creating too large a U.S. footprint. We expect the army will get bogged

down in Swat, disrupting its ambitious plans to continue this fight into the Waziristans as early as June. Whether senior Pakistani leaders as well as forces in the field have the will to see through this prolonged campaign with unpopular tactics is unclear at best. Militant offers of "surrender" or "peace deals" could prove tempting if the public grows weary of operations that have gone on too long without conventional "victory."

Retaliation

¶10. (S/NF) Militant violence accelerated following the collapse of other peace agreements (North Waziristan in July 2007 and Swat in July 2008) and resulted in multiple large scale attacks. Announcing the Swat peace agreement "dead," TTP in the same breath threatened attacks on Pakistani civilian and military institutions. Multiple spectacular attacks could weaken leadership resolve and public support for what may appear to be an open-ended military campaign on home territory. Militants have also publicly linked current Pakistani military operations to the United States, arguing that the Pakistani military is doing Washington's bidding and hoping to sow discord between Islamabad and Washington.

"Holding and Building"

¶11. (S/NF) Even if clearing operations show signs of success, the much harder and longer requirements remain -- holding territory taken back from the militants and building civilian administration and delivery of services quickly enough to shore up local confidence. As the army takes limited air assets for the Swat operation, the FC is being left with little to no air capability to hold areas of Bajaur and Mohmand they have cleared. Frontier Corps' (FC) gains in Bajaur are fragile, and the diversion of FC forces to Dir and Buner has left some key operations unfinished. Local officials note the recent assassination of a tribal leader in

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Khar as an indicator that FC's military achievements could still unravel if trouble spots go unattended. That is a caution that will apply to Swat as well.

Comment

¶12. (S/NF) There are no fast, easy, or clean fixes for Swat and other areas in Pakistan's northwest region that have become deeply troubled by militancy. Timely, well-targeted assistance, particularly humanitarian aid (septel), however, can help give the military some of the space it requires to succeed in Swat and to keep the focus of the story on combating militants rather than the government's failure to address the needs of those displaced by the fighting.

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